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ABSTRACT

The use of positive behavior supports (PBS) based on functional behavioral assessment (FBA) has produced dramatic improvements in problem behaviors of challenging students. This approach is a long-term strategy to reduce inappropriate behavior, teach more appropriate behavior, and provide contextual supports necessary for successful outcomes. Yet PBS and FBA have not been widely adopted. Challenges specific to rural schools may exacerbate the difficulties in ensuring that teachers apply this approach. Faculty at four elementary schools in Maryland and West Virginia that received training in FBA and PBS reported difficulty implementing them. To facilitate teacher implementation of these interventions, the practice environment should be conducive to change and systems should be established to reinforce that change. Teacher interest in trying out new practices has been found to be related to perceived principal and peer supports and to teacher perceptions that the proposed intervention addresses a gap in their programs. An emerging model for delivering training in FBA and PBS involves an initial whole-faculty staff development session that provides an overview of FBA and PBS including a description of its components and a rational for its use. Then volunteers, including an administrator, attend further training to become part of the school's "behavior solutions team," which meets biweekly to discuss behavior problems. During the school year, trainers gradually reduce their involvement and shift responsibility to faculty. (Contains 28 references.) (TD)

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IMPLEMENTING AND EVALUATING EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Despite a significant knowledge base about research-proven practices that facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities, few of these practices are implemented systematically in classrooms (Malouf & Schiller, 1995). This area is particularly challenging with regard to students who display troubling behavior. One practice that has produced dramatic improvements in problem behavior of the most challenging students is the use of positive behavior supports (PBS) based on functional behavioral assessment (FBA) (Gable, 1999). This approach is characterized as a long-term strategy to reduce inappropriate behavior, teach more appropriate behavior, and provide contextual supports necessary for successful outcomes. The recently enacted Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 require the IEP team to consider positive behavioral strategies for students with disabilities if the student has behavior problems that impede his learning or the learning of others. In addition, states are required to address the in-service needs and pre-service preparation of personnel to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to implement this approach.

In this paper, we first describe FBA and PBS and the skills practitioners must have to be able to implement this approach effectively. We discuss how challenges specific to rural communities may exacerbate the difficulties facing many schools across the nation in ensuring that teachers are willing and able to apply this approach. To set the context for this paper we briefly describe the types of training available to practitioners in West Virginia and parts of rural Maryland and report anecdotal data on the implementation of FBA and PBS. We then summarize the sustained use literature and how this literature might inform professional development that addresses and accommodates those needs specific to rural communities. In particular, we examine which training and training models may be effective at achieving successful implementation of PBS and FBA by practitioners. Next, we describe how this review of the literature prompted the modification and development of an instrument to facilitate systematic investigation of those variables related to sustained use. Finally, we discuss implications for training, practice, and research.

PBS based on FBA has been widely validated in clinical settings and with low-incidence populations in applied settings; however, some experts in the field have questioned the validity of the process for students with high incidence disabilities in school settings (Nelson, Roberts, Mather, & Rutherford, 1999) and even the ability and desire of public school educators to engage in such a process (Scott & Nelson, 1999). The legal mandate to consider PBS for all students with disabilities requires states to address the in-service needs and pre-service preparation of personnel to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the needs of their students with disabilities. This includes enhancing their abilities to use strategies such as behavioral interventions and supports. Scott and Nelson (1999) indicated that competence in FBA requires training in applied behavior analysis and behavioral assessment as well as an understanding of functional intervention procedures. Such training is not common in the backgrounds of most teachers and so, for the most part, state departments of education, school districts, and schools have looked to continuing professional development opportunities to provide practitioners the skills necessary to implement this approach.

Challenges Faced by Rural Districts

Rural school districts face stifling roadblocks when attempting to implement strategic changes such as inclusive education for students with disabilities and behavior problems. These roadblocks include a limited tax base

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for needed revenues, a need to deliver services over a wide geographic area, inadequate facilities, a shortage of related service providers, and high transportation costs. Staff development for educators in many rural communities is very limited because the sources of expertise for training are located at great distances from the communities in which they teach (Knapczyk, Rodes, & Brush, 1994). Limited accessibility to training in these communities makes it difficult for teachers to update their professional skills as well as to receive the necessary training to carry out their responsibilities. A number of teachers in certain specialties are unqualified or underqualified (Ludlow, 1998). In West Virginia, for example, approximately 25% of those teachers working with students with behavioral disorders are working on permit; that is, they are required to obtain 6 semester hours of coursework per year to maintain their permit to teach in an area for which they have no teaching certificate. Compounding this difficulty is a situation that arises in smaller rural communities where one person may wear many hats in terms of responsibilities. Thus, the person responsible for conducting FBAs and developing behavior intervention plans may have neither the skill nor the time to dedicate to this role or task.

Staff development in rural schools typically takes one of two forms: the school district invites an expert to deliver a short in-service workshop or educators take courses at colleges or universities that are distant from the community. In both situations geographical distance limits the extent and intensity of support and assistance provided to practitioners after the initial training. Thus, follow-up when teachers are trying to apply new concepts and skills in their classrooms is often non-existent. In order to overcome such obstacles to effective professional development, rural schools must identify ways to develop expertise and support for new approaches from within their staff. It is likely that these additional challenges facing rural schools will impact both how professional development in PBS based on FBA is delivered to rural communities and the extent to which practitioners perceive themselves willing and able to implement this approach after receiving training.

Training in FBA and PBS

In West Virginia, the state office of education called together a task force that developed the Teacher Interventions and Positive Supports (TIPS) training (Clarke, September 15,1999, personal communication). Participants from each school district attended 3 days of "train the trainer" training in IDEA discipline issues, FBA, behavior intervention planning, and social skills training returning to their school districts with all materials required to train practitioners in their school districts. Despite these efforts by West Virginia Department of Education Office of Special Education and the fact that all but two counties have participated in TIPS training, an informal survey of 40 teachers of students with behavior disorders indicated the following: Less than 23% of those teachers reported that they had received any training in FBA (Reed & Mitchem, 2001). This is particularly disheartening when one considers that most school districts report that the BD teacher is involved in or responsible for conducting FBAs needed.

We have been working with four schools, three elementary schools in Maryland and one K-8 school in West Virginia. Faculty at the K-8 school in West Virginia received TIPS training. At the elementary schools in western Maryland faculty participated in a one-week intensive course offered through the Lifequilters project at the University Affiliated Center for Developmental Disabilities. Both TIPS and Lifequilters training described FBA and PBS, when it should be implemented, what the process involved, the steps for implementing FBA, developing interventions, and evaluating progress. Training materials in each case were based on O'Neill and colleagues Functional assessment: A practical handbook (1997) and other sources. Both methods provided participants the opportunity to gain a conceptual understanding of the approach as well as practical experience in conducting FBA and PBS using case studies. Training differed in the duration (3 vs. 5 days) and the extent to which technical assistance was provided. For example, trainers from the Lifequilters project provided school-based training to an 8-10 member PBS team and then guided them through their first FBA and behavior intervention plan with a focus child from the school.

Regardless of which type of training schools received, practitioners at all four schools have indicated difficulty implementing FBA and, in particular, developing behavior intervention plans that are based on functional assessment data (Mitchem, 2000). Specific concerns related by practitioners included: insufficient time, difficulty using the behavior recording form, the seemingly inappropriate and repetitive nature of questions on the functional assessment interview (FAI), and most significantly, not knowing what to do with all the data once collected. Training participants expressed pride in the artistic MAPS (Making Action Plans, see Malatchi, 1997) that the team had created for each focus child but noted that they had in most cases been unable to identify functions of the

problem behaviors and were unsure how to proceed. A primary concern of participants centered on when in the process they could remove the child from the classroom or school.

Sustained Use Literature

A continuing challenge in education is to improve the translation and use of research findings for educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders (Carnine, 1997; Gersten & Brengelmann, 1996). Research on this issue suggests that research findings seldom find their way into classroom practice and are implemented poorly even when they do (Cuban, 1990). Even less frequently do innovative best practices become institutionalized (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Fullan, 1991; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1998). Sustained use of research-proven practices occurs only sporadically even with wide dissemination, training, and support (Carnine, 1997; Fullan, 1991; Gersten & Brengelman, 1996; Malouf & Schiller, 1995, Vaughn, Klingner, & Hughes, 2000). In light of this pervasive and widespread challenge in education, we should anticipate teachers' reluctance to implement PBS and consider the implications of this when developing and delivering training in PBS and FBA.

Highlighting this issue, Scott and Nelson (1999) question whether FBA will be an accepted practice in the classroom, regardless of its merits and point out that interventions "typically used by educators to deal with challenging student behaviors... tend to be unsystematic, negative, or both (Gunter, Denny, Jack, Shores, & Nelson, 1993; Shores, Jack, Gunter, Ellis, DeBriere, & Wehby, 1994)." (Scott & Nelson, 1999, p. 249). Persuading teachers to design interventions that focus on teaching appropriate replacement behavior in place of the more typical negative and exclusionary contingencies will be difficult even with ongoing consultation and support. The challenge then is to identify how to ensure that training in FBA and PBS leads to implementation by practitioners.

Effective Professional Development

The components of effective professional development are well-researched (e.g., Joyce & Showers, 1988). Consistent with the literature, teachers should demonstrate both conceptual understanding of the innovation and its benefits to students and themselves as well as frequent opportunities to practice skills learned to mastery. As noted by Birman, Desimone, Porter, and Garet (2000) professional development should be relevant and research-based, with opportunities for active learning, as well as being of sufficient intensity and duration to support teacher change. Effective professional development provides practitioners with the knowledge, skills, and conceptual understanding necessary to implement an innovation. The problem for small rural schools is delivering such professional development activities in a way that overcomes cost and distance barriers, provides opportunities for collegiality for teachers with similar needs and interests, makes follow-up support available, and provides significant experiential training (Storer & Crosswait, 1995).

Mitchem and Young (in press) have suggested examining not only the acceptability and feasibility of an intervention, in this case PBS and FBA, but also our efforts to facilitate teachers' adoption of the intervention. We need to investigate not only how to address students' problem behavior using PBS but also how to facilitate and support educators' implementation of this approach. Additional questions to consider include the extent to which we make the practice environment more conducive to change and the systems we establish to reinforce such change. For example, teachers often intervene simply to stop inappropriate behaviors. We may need to help teachers understand that providing a challenging student PBS may lead to the presence of more appropriate behaviors. Accomplishing this may help to reinforce the teachers' use of these supports. Vadasy and colleagues (1997) also found that teacher interest in trying out new practices is related to perceived principal and peer supports as well as to teachers' perceptions that the proposed intervention addresses a gap in their programs. Additional efforts, therefore, to involve administrators in training, to train teams of teachers, and to help teachers document positive effects of PBS on classroom behavior may be fruitful.

It appears that training is not the only major factor affecting the successful introduction of an innovation such as PBS and FBA. Both understanding and perceptions of all stakeholders are key factors to consider when attempting to introduce and promote adoption of an innovation. Although adoption and sustained use of PBS and FBA are the focus of this paper, we are interested in the broader question of how to promote practitioners' adoption and sustained use of research-proven practices in general. Researchers in the medical field have identified similar concerns regarding best practice implementation. In an attempt to elucidate salient features of interventions that improve professional practice, medical researchers have formed the Cochrane Effective Practice and Organization of

Care Group. This group prepares and keeps up to date reviews of interventions to improve professional practice using a comprehensive data collection checklist that permits evaluation of a number of potentially salient factors (Cochrane Collaboration, 1999). Use of this index in the medical field has produced a consolidated data-base to identify research-proven practices.

Based on our review of the literature, the Cochrane index, and consistent with the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) (2000) recommendations, we hypothesize that the factors influencing sustained use of research-based practices in schools may be conceptualized and evaluated along four broad dimensions: (a) characteristics of the context (including characteristics of the participants, school and community, professional and regulatory bodies); (b) content (the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed or nature of the innovation); (c) the process (the way knowledge, skills, and attitudes are acquired or nature of the professional development and supports); and (d) nature of the outcomes (including teacher understanding of the innovation and mastery of the professional development objectives). We believe that features within these dimensions interact to influence the impact or degree of sustained use of the innovation (Mitchem & Wells, 2000). Developing an educational equivalent to the Cochrane Index might provide researchers with an instrument to synthesize the results of current and past investigations of sustained use of innovations. It is conceivable that such a data base could be used to develop decisions rules to guide selection of appropriate professional development activities, contextual supports, and incentives to inform practitioners of these practices.

Implications for Training, Practice, and Research

As this educational equivalent to the Cochrane Index is evolving, so too is our training model. We agree with Gersten, Chard, and Baker's (2000) recommendations for training to ensure sustainability. They recommend that training include: a plan to promote sustainability, realistic expectations, opportunities for teachers to understand and think through an approach, systems to enhance teacher efficacy such as peer networks and support, sufficient administrative support, and explicit links between change and student data. Thus, our training involves an initial whole faculty staff development session in which an overview of FBA and PBS is provided including a description of its components and a rationale for its use. At this meeting, we ask for volunteers, including an administrator, who are willing to attend further training to become part of the school's "behavior solutions team." This smaller group commits to an additional two days of training followed by biweekly meetings where they meet to discuss behavior problems, identify who needs to collect what data, and generate hypothesis statements, strategies and supports, and provide ongoing updates on focus students. At the biweekly solutions team meetings we have tried to provide coaching and support for teachers developing strategies and supports rather than providing solutions themselves. Although we facilitated the first behavior solutions team meeting, that responsibility has now shifted to faculty members at the school. Over the course of the school year we plan to reduce the intensity of our involvement to monthly face-to-face meetings, then to email support with face-to-face meetings only quarterly. Finally, at monthly faculty meetings the behavior solutions team shares data on office referrals, suspensions, and student/teacher successes.

Conclusion

Even when information regarding best practice methods is widely disseminated and empirically validated approaches are available and mandated, educators appear reluctant to use them. In this paper, we described FBA and PBS and the skills and competencies needed by practitioners to implement this approach. We summarized the challenges faced by rural school districts in ensuring that their faculty and staff receive appropriate training in this approach. Examples from our experiences with four schools in rural Maryland and West Virginia are provided as illustrations. An emerging model based on a review of effective professional development practices and the sustained use literature is presented to assist staff developers and administrators in delivering training in FBA and PBS (Mitchem & Wells, 2000). This model of professional development was designed to help build capacity within the school building, demystify and streamline the FBA and PBS approach, and to address and accommodate rural school needs.

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